

# Studying while you work?

Lifelong learning is no longer an optional extra and this will involve you studying while you work

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**S**tudying while you work? It can be done. Like many, many others I have done it — A-levels, a degree and two postgraduate qualifications.

Along the way I have learnt quite a lot — about things (ideas, theories, propositions, terminology, concepts, models) as well as knowledge about how to do (and not to do) things. I have also learnt from experience — by testing out what I have learnt. This article is based both on those personal experiences as well as observation of other students in a similar situation (ie, working and learning at the same time). Some of these students have been studying courses I have helped to produce, and some of them have had work marked by me!

The way that anyone approaches a learning experience varies. Some of us are simply after the bit of paper that gives us the qualification. Others are taking the course because they are curious and want to advance their understanding and own personal development. Others may combine these approaches but want to do so through attainment of the highest grades possible. Your approach will

influence the way that you study the course. But you must be sure of your objectives before you even select the course to study. What is it you are hoping to achieve?

## Postgraduate versus undergraduate

If you are studying for a higher degree, you should note that what you learn is primarily up to you and not the teacher. Postgraduate education is not about memorising large quantities of facts. There will be more ideas and theories but it is for you to construct your own knowledge.

It is about understanding the topics covered within the course. You will need to interact with what you are studying, transforming it so that it is meaningful for you. You will be weaving a spider's web of knowledge and appreciation rather than building a brick wall of facts.

Postgraduate courses have frameworks within which you will have to work but you will be encouraged to create your own shape through the provision of an argued

rationale and supporting evidence. For postgraduate courses, there is a movement from the accumulation of facts to extension of what has been learnt previously and, hopefully, to finding greater meaningfulness.

### Controlling the clock

Whatever the level of course you need to allocate time for doing it. Most courses will give you an estimated number of hours study. This is often a minimum. Ask yourself (and all those who are near and dear to you and who will be affected by your studying) just when that time is going to be allocated. I am assuming that your life is already full, so something will need to go — albeit temporarily! What is it? Who will this affect and how?

How flexible can you and others be over your allocated study times? Sometimes you will find it easier to do a short intensive burst. At other times you may need a longer stretch of time. But as a general rule, make sure that you do not work for longer than an hour without a few minutes of getting up and moving

away from your study place. Little and often is better than infrequently.

Get the commitment of everyone concerned to respect your study time. Draw up a timetable that marks on it for everyone to see dates and times of any classes, tutorials or TV programmes that form part of the course. If your course involves distance/self-study learning, mark up your timetable with dates for starting and finishing units/modules. Use some brightly coloured pen to mark on your calendar/timetable due dates for assignments. Blank out time for doing them.

### Where is the study?

Where are you going to do this studying? Anywhere and everywhere is a distinct possibility. Do not rule out time on the train or sitting in lay-bys or motorway service stations if these provide study time. Sometimes we can remember things we learnt in an unusual situation.

But it does help to have a permanent place where you can leave all your books

and papers untouched by others. This can be difficult if you are sharing a PC with other members of the family and if there is not a separate telephone line for internet access. If either or both of these will be the situation, then negotiate with others in the house how access to the PC/internet is to be managed.

Decide how and where you will keep your books and papers. If the dining room or kitchen table is being used, then again, agree ground rules about how those can be used when you are studying — best not at all otherwise the coffee will spill over your notes and computer!

### Comprehending the apparently incomprehensible

Whatever the course, you will have reading to do. There are many books on how to read, but for me the following process works well (although I do not always like doing this).

Start by looking at any of the course objectives that relate to the study source. Then, read quickly the relevant chapter, book or whatever is the study information source. This will give you a feel both for the structure and the general theme(s) covered. Also, and importantly, observe the particular approach or arguments that the author has to his or her subject.

Do not attempt to understand the detail it contains. Then ask yourself if you think that the source is going to be helpful to you. Sort through in your own mind the reasons behind your views. Whether or not you see it as being helpful, write a summary of what it is the author is saying. By expressing this in your own words you will be starting to engage with the subject.

If you feel the source is useful (whether or not you like it), then go back and re-read those bits that seem to be particularly relevant or interesting. This is the time for the detailed study. Again, you will need to write your own commentary about what the text is saying. Try to link this up with other ideas that you have

come across. How do they change or add to these?

Then look through at least one other book or reference source on the same subject. Follow the same process, and then compare the two. If they are different, why is that? Which do you find more acceptable or believable? Why? Make your own notes again.

### Information at your fingertips

You will find it helpful if you have a proper system for recording and filing the notes that you make, particularly in relation to the reading that you do. You will have your own preference: on the computer, index cards, bound book or ring binder. The important point is to record all the relevant reference source details (eg, author, name of book, publication date, page numbers) first with your own notes below. Write down any specific quotes that you think will be helpful. Develop some system of coding by subject or topic so that you can quickly find the relevant details when preparing for assignments.

### Crunch time — assignments

All courses, inevitably, have assignments to be submitted. It is important that you always aim to submit on time, otherwise you will get dispirited as you drop further behind. It pays to read carefully any guidance about the form that assignments should take. There may be a guide for the number of words or a particular format.

Nowadays the normal expectation is that work will not be hand-written. Usually any work will need to be referenced. That will demonstrate to the marker that at a minimum you have read and understood course material. Answer the question that has been set, although note that at postgraduate level you are likely to have considerably flexibility about how you interpret the question. But be sure you justify your interpretation.

If you have studied the topic well, made notes on your reading and thought about the subject matter, you should have some views to express in response to the question. I was given two pieces of

advice about writing. First, forget about the word limit — once you start writing the words are likely to come, provided you have truly engaged with the material. The second piece of advice was to sit down and write 100 words. Almost always that broke the barrier and got me started. There is something quite frightening about a blank sheet of paper.

Try to avoid revising your initial draft. The purpose at this stage is to get to the end. The process of writing the preliminary draft may help you to a greater understanding and stronger views about the topic. You will be able to reflect this during your editing process and the production of the second version. As a rough guide, once you have done the research needed for an assignment you should be able to write around 1,000 words a day.

Submit the assignment when it is due. Tell yourself that what you have done is the best that you could do in the time available.

### Life outside the course

Above all, make time for yourself and your friends. Take holidays and other social breaks. If you find yourself fidgeting around, perhaps you need to take some physical exercise, or deal with what is nagging away at the back of your mind. If the energy starts to flag, remind yourself why it is you are doing this course. Turn to friends for support and encouragement. They know that you can do it. Learning should be fun, so enjoy your course. ✨